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Erase the Nation

THE FIRST break in the ranks of Newt Gingrich's revolutionaries opened up in the House the other night when, to the surprise of all, the House voted to shoot down Star Wars. Twenty-four Republicans defied their leader to say no on the emotional issue that is the legacy of Ronald Reagan. To the Democrats, it was as cheering as the sight of a crocus pushing up through the snow.

Gingrich's rationalization for the first setback to his Contract was that he did not whip—that is whip up—votes against the amendment by Rep. John Spratt's (D-S.C.) to stop Star Wars. Some wondered if his heart was in it. Gingrich is now maximum leader of a party that has pledged a balanced

budget, and some say he fought against including military increases in the Contract. The bill for Star Wars comes to a budget-busting \$100 billion and it's hard to be sentimental at that price.

The Democrats, who are understandably a bit defeatist these days, didn't lean on their members, either. The morning after the upset, Gingrich threatened to bring Reagan's favorite government program back for another vote. But after a sweep-around discovered there were not enough converts to be had for the extravaganza—which was hotly opposed by the Pentagon and the Clinton White House—the speaker let it go.

The only casualty, and he will live, is young John Kasich of Ohio, chairman of the House Budget Committee, and what passes for a rebel in Republican

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circles—that is, someone who does not have an unlimited appetite for exotic and expensive weapons. He voted against the B-2 bomber last year, and Wednesday night he voted against Star Wars. But Thursday morning, loyalty to the leader won out, and he announced he would change his vote. That was just hours before the speaker folded his tent. Kasich had squandered his reputation for nothing.

Spratt, the conservative Democrat who grounded the Strategic Defense Initiative, as Reagan preferred to call Star Wars, became a hero to his party. After the floor action, he walked into a leadership meeting and got a standing ovation.

The White House was elated. The defeat of Star Wars made Clinton stand taller. He is in charge of the nation's defenses, after all. To their consternation, House Republicans have unintentionally said that the president, even if he is Bill Clinton, is commander-in-chief.

What the Republican House had done, inadvertently, of course, was to reassert the primacy of the central government they are sworn to humble. Ever since the Republicans won their great victory in November, we have been hearing about the superiority of the states.

The argument is most vigorously made in the Ways and

Means Committee which is considering welfare reform. The trashing of the federal government is so unrelenting and intense that if the proceedings were made into a documentary, it would have to be called "Erase the Nation." The premise of the Republicans is that nothing good can come out of Washington, that it is peopled by indolent incompetents whose only purpose

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in life is to frustrate and confound honest folks in the provinces, who if left to their own devices, would reduce teen pregnancy, rein in errant fathers and save money.

Two black members, Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.) and Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), burst in from

time to time with impassioned pleas to remember that they were dealing with the lives of desperate little children, who are entitled to the intervention and protection of the federal government—they remember "states' rights" as an infamous code word for segregation.

But when Rep. Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) one of Speaker Gingrich's most trusted lieutenants, used the word "bureaucrat," his tones curled with contempt. If abused and neglected children in the states' care die, they are better off being investigated by local citizens review commissions than some bureaucrat in the employ of the secretary of health and human services, who is probably contaminated too, in Nussle's eyes, by the mere fact of living by the Potomac River.

The rancor and acrimony is constant and draining. So is the foolishness of much that was said about the nurture of little children whose chances of growing up wholesome or at all, are minimal at best. Rangel noted that six states have done such a swell job that they are under court orders for their treatment of abused and neglected children.

Wednesday night's vote on Star Wars showed us that members, by a narrow margin to be sure, can set limits on the folly that is presented to them as revolution and reform. Only six votes made the difference, but let us count our blessings.